Exercise 4.4
An Edict to Edit

Some words (like edict*) may not convey the right message to an audience. Resource professionals are comfortable with a certain type of technical language that may not be easy for the general public to understand. Sample paragraphs of technical text give participants a chance to remove the technical jargon and create more user-friendly prose.

Objective: Participants will be able to identify technical jargon that should be changed in written text for the general public.

Materials:

Copies of *Handout 1: Technical Cards*—one card for each person in every group
Original text paragraphs reprinted on overhead transparency
Overhead transparencies
Overhead markers
Overhead projector
Fact Sheet 4.3: The Language of Conservation
Fact Sheet 4.5: Tools for Understanding Audiences
Presentation 4.1

Time: 30 minutes

1. Explain to participants that after a degree in natural resource management and day-to-day interaction with colleagues, resource professionals communicate very well with each other. They use the same language and may even know what their colleagues will say before the words come out. This high degree of familiarity makes it difficult to recognize their expertise. Some resource professionals may need reminders in order to efficiently communicate with the general public. They forget that everyone does not know what they know. They may not recognize what the public understands about natural resources or what words they use to talk about them. ***Fact Sheet 4.3: The Language of Conservation*** provides specific examples of the words common in the resource field that carry different meanings to the general public. ***Presentation 4.1*** provides instructions for this exercise.

2. Remind your participants that an audience assessment and informal conversations with people who represent the audience can help them realize that technical jargon can be like a foreign language to the general public. This exercise shows natural resource professionals how to practice identifying common technical jargon that they may use in writing and how to change it to more reader-friendly text. Use ***Fact Sheet 4.5: Tools for Understanding Audiences*** to provide guidelines for collecting audience information.

3. Divide the participants into groups of 3 to 7 and distribute the same technical card (*Handout 1*) to each member of a group. The cards are four overly jargon-filled paragraphs on topics that are relevant to wildland-urban interface audiences. After giving them a chance to read their paragraph, ask the participants to describe some of the general characteristics that would make it difficult for the public to understand the text. They may suggest the following:

   - Technical language and citations
   - An assumption of background knowledge
   - Written in third person
   - Generic descriptions; nothing local or concrete

4. Then ask them to work with their small group to make changes that will help the sample paragraph be more user-friendly, rewriting the paragraph if necessary. The goal is to make this information clear and understandable to the general public. Here are some techniques that will help convert technical text to user-friendly prose:

   - Swap out technical words with more understandable phrases or words
   - Shorten sentences
   - Shorten words
   - Change passive sentences to active voice
   - Add the word "you" to personalize the information
   - Add local examples and concrete specific information
   - Add adjectives that help the reader visualize the concept

5. Provide an overhead transparency and a marker to each group and ask them to copy their final, edited paragraph onto the transparency for their presentation.

6. Facilitate a discussion that demonstrates how groups have used each of the six tips presented in step 4. Resource professionals may habitually use a tone and voice in a distant and scientific information style (a result of both their academic background and the nature of government agencies). This exercise helps participants alter this style and see that communication is often better through the use of vivid descriptions, action verbs, and storytelling.

Summary

A few concrete suggestions can help resource professionals write and speak in a language that is more understandable by the general public. Local examples and using the words "you" and "we" are two techniques that are very effective but often are more difficult for resource professionals to adopt.

***** An edict is an authoritative decree or proclamation.

Handout 1: Technical Cards

1. The southern pine beetle (SPB), *Dendroctonus frontalis* Zimmermann, is the most destructive insect pest of pine in the southern United States. A recent historical review estimated that SPB caused $900 million of damage to pine forests from 1960 through 1990 (Price *et al*. 1992). This aggressive native insect lives predominantly in the inner bark of pine trees. Trees attacked by SPB often exhibit hundreds of resin masses on the outer tree bark. SPB feed on phloem tissue where they construct winding serpentine galleries that can girdle a tree. SPB also carry blue-stain fungi. These fungi colonize xylem tissue and block water flow within the tree, also causing tree mortality (Thatcher and Conner 1985). Consequently, once SPB have successfully colonized a tree, the tree cannot survive, regardless of control measures.

2. Japanese climbing fern, *Lygodium japonicum*, is densely established throughout the Apalachicola River floodplain and much of Florida's panhandle counties. Due to Japanese climbing fern's noxious weed status, movement of all forest products contaminated with fronds or spores is considered a violation of state rule and has begun to receive regulatory attention in Florida. Japanese climbing fern is a twining fern that grows as a vine up tree stems and along the ground. Leaflets are somewhat deltoidal and deeply lobed. Leaflets with a frilly edging bear spores that mature in the fall. Research on control is ongoing through UF, FDACS, USDA, and FLDEP. Best results have been achieved with a growing season foliar application of 1 oz/acre metsulfuron methyl (e.g., Escort®) or 1.5% gylphosate (e.g., Roundup® or Accord®), or a tank mix of the two herbicides at low rates.

3. Fire behavior refers to the intensity at which a fire burns and how it moves. Plants are the primary fuels during wildfires, and they transfer heat through three basic mechanisms: *convection, radiation,* and *conduction*. The transfer of heat by the upward movement of a gas or liquid is called *convection*. During wildfires convection currents preheat the leaves and branches of shrubs and trees yet to be consumed. The vertical air currents can also lift burning materials. Burning objects release energy in the form of *radiation*. The size of the burning object determines the amount of radiant heat released. Radiant heat from a wildfire will usually not ignite a house that is more than 30 feet away. Heat transfer from direct contact is *conduction*. Conduction carries heat through fuels, such as logs or house walls, and can raise the temperature of such objects to ignition points.

4. Urban forestry refers to post-development planting or pre-development preservation of trees, shrubs, and other ground covers in an urban context. This lot-level BMP is a functional and attractive supplement to residential lawns and has positive implications for property values if trees and shrubs mature. Studies have been conducted that assess the impact of natural forests on hydrology. These studies demonstrate that urban forests can help reduce the quantity of storm water flows and help improve the quality of storm water runoff. In addition, urban forests convey a number of environmental benefits through air pollutant uptake and greenhouse gas reduction functions. These functions will make urban forestry an increasingly valuable BMP from an environmental and economic perspective.